

# Existential fulfillment and teacher burnout

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## Existential Fulfillment And Teacher Burnout

### ABSTRACT

The aim of the current study is to determine the prevalence of burnout in primary education teachers and explore the relationship of personal fulfillment – the existence scale – to self-reported burnout scores. 215 primary education teachers in the Netherlands participated in a cross-sectional study using an anonymous, mailed survey. Personal fulfillment in one's existence was measured by the Längle, Orgler and Kundi (2003b) existence scale that consists of four subscales, i.e. "self-distance", "self-transcendence", "freedom" and "responsibility". Burnout was measured by applying the Maslach Burnout Inventory.

Regression analysis shows that the lower the scores on responsibility and self-distance the higher the scores on emotional exhaustion. There is also an inverted relationship between self-transcendence and depersonalization: the lower the scores on self-transcendence the higher the scores on depersonalization. Responsibility and self-transcendence are significantly related to personal accomplishment. Teacher age correlates only with the latter burnout dimension: the younger teachers are the more they have a sense of high personal accomplishment.

**Key words:** Existential Fulfillment, Burnout, Teachers

### Introduction

Burnout is a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and a sense of low personal accomplishment (MASLACH, JACKSON & LEITER, 1996). It is associated with decreased job performance (BROUWERS & TOMIĆ, 2000; EVERS, BROUWERS, & TOMIĆ, 2002), reduced job commitment and predicts low career satisfaction (LEMKAU, RAFFERTY, & GORDON, 1994), and stress-related health problems (MASLACH, SCHAUFELI, & LEITER, 2001).

According to LÄNGLE (2003a) burnout has to be understood as an enduring state of exhaustion due to work. However, in a broader perspective burnout is to be understood as a form of an existential vacuum that is characterized by apathy, boredom and a loss of interest in relationships. People displaying symptoms of an existential vacuum appeared to have high degrees of depersonalization and emotional exhaustion (KARAZMAN, 1994). Burnout people

lack a sense of inner fulfillment, or in other words they misinterpret the necessities and components for successful human existence. Burnout people view their work as something to serve their own aims and not as something that should be valued because of its unique value and inherent meaning (LÄNGLE, 2003a).

In studies on burnout the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) is almost the only instrument used to measure whether and to what degree workers suffer from burnout. The MBI is not only the most widely used instrument to measure burnout, but also an international accepted instrument and consists of three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. In the Netherlands the MBI has been applied as an instrument of research among workers in many occupations: teachers (BROUWERS, EVERS & TOMIĆ, 2001; EVERS, BROUWERS, & TOMIĆ, 2002), nurses (JANSSEN, SCHAUFELI, & HOUKES, 1999; OGUS, 1990), dentists (GORTER, 2000), carers for the elderly (EVERS, BROUWERS, & TOMIĆ, 2002), and pastors (TOMIĆ, & EVERS, 2003), to mention but a few.

Whereas the MBI is meant to measure the degree of burnout among categories of workers or individual workers, the Existence Scale (LÄNGLE, ORGLER, & KUNDI, 2003b) is a 46-item questionnaire "...assessing the degree of someone's personal fulfillment in one's existence." (LÄNGLE ET AL., 2003b, p. 135). The questionnaire asks the respondent after his competence "...to cope in a meaningful way with oneself and the world" (LÄNGLE ET AL., 2003b, p. 136). To this end the authors of the questionnaire posed that the individual has to take four steps to find the way to the realization of a meaningful life or the realization of his existential potentiality. These steps are, first, the search of meaning in life, which means the individual has to gather relevant information of world's objects. Distortion of reality may be an impediment to reach the other steps. Second, the individual's understanding of the qualitative relationship between the objects and between the objects and the individual himself. The third step refers to the individual's choice of the various options the world offers, which means that he has to eliminate some possibilities in favor of others. This step also deals with the individual's devotion to the chosen option. The last step consists of the individual's carrying out of his decisions and plans. Steps 1 and 2 are called the P-factor, they deal with the development of the Personality. Steps 3 and 4 are called the E-factor, and deal with Existential field, or with taking and realizing decisions.

Burnout appears common among teachers (BROUWERS & TOMIĆ, 2000; EVERS ET AL. 2002). However, until now only one study associated existential fulfillment with burnout (NINDL, 2001). In the present study we examined the prevalence of burnout and existential fulfillment among primary education teachers and evaluated the relationship of existential fulfillment to burnout dimensions.

## Method

### *Participants*

We randomly selected 300 teachers of primary schools from a district in the middle of the Netherlands and asked them to participate in our study. All teachers were eligible for the present study. We mailed a 72-item, self-administered survey to teachers' homes. The survey addressed topics in the following order: existence scale, burnout inventory, and demographic characteristics (gender, teacher age, years of work experience). The accompanying cover letter states that the purpose of the study was to better understand teachers' feelings of personal fulfillment in one's existence and teacher well-being. The letter also explained that participation was elective and that responses would be anonymous. Teachers were blinded to any specific hypothesis of the study, and burnout was not mentioned in the cover letter. After the survey was mailed to all teachers, one reminder was sent by mail fourteen days later. In order to try and raise the response rate we followed suggestions from GREEN, BOSER AND HUTCHINSON (1997): we provided respondents with postage free envelopes, we sent the questionnaires to the respondents directly, the respondents could contact us at any time if necessary, and we used a rather brief questionnaire. In total 215 surveys were returned, a response of 72%, which is not only very good for survey research according to BABBIE (1995), but also in accordance with the findings of ASCH, JEDRZIEWSKI, AND CHRISTAKIS (1997).

The number of male teachers was 44 (20.47%) and the number of female teachers was 171 (79.53%). The mean age of our respondents was 39.46 whereas the national mean age of primary school teachers is 40.49. There was no significant difference concerning the variable "age" of the 215 respondents and the total population of teachers:  $t(309) = 1.29, p = < .05$ .

### *Instruments*

**Burnout** was measured with the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MASLACH, JACKSON & LEITER, 1986; Dutch translation by SCHAUFELI & VAN DIERENDONCK, 1995). The items of the MBI-NL for human service professionals were presented simultaneously in Dutch and English; independent and professional translators so as not to deviate from the original intentions of the authors did the translations. The MBI (20 items) consists of 3 sub-scales: emotional exhaustion (8 items), e.g. "Working with people all day is really a strain for me"; depersonalization (5 items), e.g. "I don't really care what happens to some of the young residents; and personal accomplishment (7 items), e.g. "I have accomplished many worthwhile things in this job". Teachers responded on a 7-point scale, from "never" to "always". MBI reliability tests (SCHAUFELI, 1990) showed that the emotional exhaustion sub-scale is the most reliable of the three; Cronbach's alphas vary between .80 and .90. The other two sub-scales appeared to have Cronbach's alphas of between .70 and .80, which may be regarded as sufficient for research purposes according to NUNNALLY AND BERNSTEIN (1994).

The three-factor structure of the *Dutch* version of the MBI-NL has been investigated with confirmatory factor analysis (GREEN & WALKEY, 1988; VLERICK, 1995; SCHAUFELI & VAN DIERENDONCK,

1994). SCHAUFELI AND VAN HORN (1995) found acceptable degrees of internal consistency, alphas of .87, .71 and .78, for emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment, respectively (N = 916).

**Personal fulfillment in one's existence** was measured with The Existence Scale. The survey consists of 46 items and is based on questions relating to the achievement of four steps necessary to reach the fulfillment of one's personal life: subscale 1 is called "self-distance" (8 items), subscale 2 is called "self-transcendence" (14 items), subscale 3 is called "freedom" (11 items); and subscale 4 is called "responsibility" (13 items). LÄNGLE (2003b) found acceptable degrees of internal consistency, alphas of .70, .85, .82 and .83 for self-distance, self-transcendence, freedom, and responsibility, respectively (N = 1028).

### Results

Table 1 shows the reliability coefficients of the MBI and the Existence Scale. Internal consistency coefficients of the LÄNGLE ET AL. (2003b) study are higher, for his sample consisted of a heterogeneous group of 1028 respondents, whereas our sample consisted of a homogeneous group of primary schoolteachers.

**Table 1. A Survey of Alpha Coefficients for the Existence Scale Subscales From the Present Study and the Längle et al. Study (2003b).**

Existence Scale Subscales	Number of Items per Scale	Present Study Teacher Sample (N = 215)	Längle et al. General Population Sample (N = 1028)
Self-distance (SD)	8 items	.71	.70
Self-transcendence (ST)	14 items	.76	.85
Freedom (F)	11 items	.71	.82
Responsibility (R)	13 items	.80	.83
Total score	46 items	.90	.93

Table 2 presents the mean scores, standard deviations and correlations between the four existence subscales and three burnout dimensions. The results show that self-distance, self-transcendence, freedom and responsibility are negatively correlated to both emotional exhaustion and depersonalization: the less the scores on the existence subscales, the higher the scores on the two burnout dimensions. The existence subscales are positively correlated to personal accomplishment: the higher the scores on the existence subscales, the higher the personal accomplishment scores. The results also show that the higher the responsibility scores, the older teachers are. Correlation coefficients are significant.

**Table 2. A Survey of Mean Scores, Standard Deviations and Correlations Between Burnout Dimensions and Independent Variables (N = 215)**

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Teacher Age	39.46	10.69							
2. Emotional Exhaustion	12.65	6.24	-.04						
3. Depersonalization	3.31	2.61	.03	.42**					
4. Personal Accomplishment	32.28	4.56	-.07	-.29**	-.30**				
5. Self-Distance	37.41	4.82	.08	-.37**	-.34**	.37**			
6. Self-Transcendence	73.34	5.08	.11	-.33**	-.45**	.40**	.53**		
7. Freedom	52.29	5.78	.01	-.34**	-.39**	.43**	.55**	.66**	
8. Responsibility	61.87	7.21	.20**	-.39**	-.35**	.41**	.53**	.55**	.73**

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

Hierarchical regression was applied to determine if addition of information regarding self-distance and then self-transcendence, freedom and responsibility improved prediction of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishment (Table 3).

In the first step of the analysis teacher age is entered to determine how much variance in the dependent variables, i.e. the three dimensions of burnout, can be accounted for by differences in age. In the second step self-distance is entered to determine if there is a significant increase in  $R^2$  when differences in self-distance are added to the equation. The third step is the entry of self-transcendence to determine if differences in self-transcendence are related to dimensions of burnout after differences in age, self-distance and self-transcendence are statistically accounted for. The fourth step is the entry of freedom, and the fifth step is the entry of the independent variable responsibility. Because burnout consists of three dimensions, three regression analyses have been employed.

After step 1, with teacher age in the equation,  $R^2 = .00$ ,  $F_{\text{inc}}(1, 209) = .312$ ,  $p > .05$ . After step 2, with self-distance added to prediction of emotional exhaustion, the equation  $R^2 = .13$ ,  $F_{\text{inc}}(1, 209) = 16.33$ ,  $p < .001$ . Addition of self-distance to the equation with teacher age results in a significant increment in  $R^2$ . After step 3, with self-transcendence added to prediction of emotional exhaustion by age and self-distance,  $R^2 = .16$ ,  $F_{\text{inc}}(1, 209) = 13.44$ ,  $p < .001$ . Addition of self-transcendence to the equation improved  $R^2$ . After step 4, with freedom added to the prediction of emotional exhaustion,  $R^2 = .70$ . Addition of freedom did not reliably improve  $R^2$ . After step 5, with responsibility added,  $R^2 = .20$ , which means a significant increment.

The results show that there is no reliable increase in prediction of emotional exhaustion by addition of teacher age and freedom to the equation if differences in self-distance, self-transcendence, and responsibility are already accounted for. Regression analysis shows that the

lower the scores on responsibility and self-distance the higher the scores on emotional exhaustion. There is also an inverted relationship between self-transcendence and depersonalization: the lower the scores on self-transcendence the higher the scores on depersonalization. Responsibility and self-transcendence are significantly related to personal accomplishment. Teacher age correlates only with the latter burnout dimension: the younger teachers are the more they have a sense of high personal accomplishment..

**Table 3. Hierarchical Regression of Predicting Variables on Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization, and Personal Accomplishment**

Predicting Variable	Emotional Exhaustion		Depersonalization		Personal Accomplishment	
	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$
Step 1: Teacher Age	.04	.00	.09	.00	-.14*	.01
Step 2: Self-distance	-.19*	.13**	-.10	.12**	.13	.14**
Step 3: Self-transcendence	-.12	.03*	-.31**	.10**	.18*	.06**
Step 4: Freedom	.03	.01	-.06	.01	.10	.02*
Step 5: Responsibility	-.25*	.03*	-.10	.00	.20*	.02*
Overall Regression F test		10.10**		12.68**		13.89**

\*p < .05, \*\*p < .01

## Discussion

To our knowledge, this is the second study to evaluate the relationship between existential fulfillment and teacher burnout dimensions. Results showed that existential fulfillment – self-distance, self-transcendence, freedom and responsibility – is significantly negatively related to emotional exhaustion and depersonalization and positively to reduced personal accomplishment. These findings are in agreement with LÄNGLE'S (2003a) conception of burnout and existential meaning. The present study also confirms KARAZMAN'S (1994) research on female Austrian physicians. NINDL (2001) examined the relationship between existential fulfillment and three dimensions of teacher burnout. He observed significant negative correlations between the four dimensions of existential fulfillment and emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. These results are in agreement with our study.

Our study has some limitations. Although the response rate was quite acceptable, response bias remains a possibility. We conducted our study primarily in January, after the Christmas break – a time of year during which teacher morale is typically relatively high (BROUWERS & TOMIĆ, 2000). Therefore, surveying teachers at a different time of year, for instance in June, could have resulted in different rates of burnout. We could not compare respondents with non-

respondents because, to fully protect the anonymity of all teachers – regardless of participation –, we obtained only limited demographic information from respondents. We did not obtain data on nonrespondents.

Measures in our study were based on self-report, and we do not know the extent to which these self-reports accurately reflect existential fulfillment and burnout assessed in the survey. Naturally, the results of the present study regarding the association between existential fulfillment and burnout should be viewed cautiously, yet there are no indications that these findings solely reflect biased respondent reporting. The findings of the survey could be used to generate hypotheses for future research. Finally, our study is limited by its cross-sectional design. Future longitudinal studies are required to evaluate the possibility of a causal relationship between existential fulfillment and teacher burnout.

However, in spite of the limitations, our study has several important strengths. To our knowledge, the current study has a larger number of participants than previously reported studies regarding existential fulfillment and teacher burnout (NINDL, 2001). Second, our study had a quite acceptable survey response rate (BABBIE, 1995; ASCH, ET AL. (1997). Third, teachers were blinded to the purpose of the study. Fourth, the observed association between existential fulfillment and teacher burnout was statistically significant and large enough to suggest that the findings could be meaningful.

Increased understanding of existential fulfillment – self-distance, self-transcendence, freedom and responsibility – that lead to teacher burnout seems to be essential. Therefore, it is important to conduct future studies which hopefully replicate our findings.

The present study shows that existential fulfillment in one's existence was associated with burnout dimensions. Further investigation of the prevalence, causes, consequences, and management of teacher burnout is needed.

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